

Younger feeling younger

Tribal Elder no longer carries that weight

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

Credit an anonymous late-night infomercial host with possibly saving a life.

Tribal Elder Lew Younger said he doesn't remember the host's name and that it doesn't matter.

"It was all white noise to me at that point," said Younger of the epiphany he had at 2 a.m. on Nov. 22, 2014. "I was in a fog anyway from waking up and not being able to sleep. But what got through to me was the message of how simple changing my diet and changing my life could be."

Younger, who works as the Tribe's wastewater treatment technician and serves on Spirit Mountain Casino's Board of Directors, said he was so overweight that he couldn't tie his shoes and that when he woke up that night he couldn't breathe because he had been choking.

"I'm 62 years old. I had a decision to make," said Younger. "It was the week of Thanksgiving. It was the week of Restoration. I thought about my wife and I thought do I want to become a burden to her or do I want to become an asset. It occurred to me if I had died and my family asked me in heaven 'Why did I leave?' I didn't have a good answer."

The late-night television made him think of the friends in "Shawshank Redemption" who had an epiphany of their own. "I thought to myself, 'There comes a time when you have to start living or you have start dying.'"

Now, Younger wants to save lives. He is hoping Tribal members will be inspired by his story of weight loss and renewed health. He hopes if someone can relate, they might see how simple it can be in their own life.

"I was pushing 225 pounds on a 5-foot-2-inch frame," said Younger. "That is a lot of weight. I got up out of breath on November 22 and I turned on the television set out in the living room and there was this guy talking. He wasn't selling anything. He was talking about nutrition. He was talking about how your body dehydrates itself, so when you get up in the morning drink a glass of water."

Younger said about an hour after waking up each morning he now eats a high-fiber breakfast: oatmeal, cream of wheat or raisin bran.

"Don't drink water with your meal; it dilutes what your body has to process," said Younger. "Wait 15 minutes after your meal and then drink another glass of water."

Balancing intake and portions are the key, he said.

"It doesn't matter what you eat, as long as what you eat is balanced," said Younger. "Your body needs to consist of a certain amount of proteins and a certain amount of carbohydrates and fibers. You have

to have a certain amount of carbs. You need a combination of fruits and vegetables. It doesn't matter what the combination is. Eat only one serving."

Younger said that because the human body is like an oven and using the water all of the time, people must replace that water constantly.

Younger said he now tries to walk so that he can burn those calories he has consumed.

"It doesn't have to be high-intensity, but in the afternoon get in some exercise," said Younger. "Then in the evening, repeat what you did at lunch. Balance your meals out. Eat your snack and then sleep well. I started thinking about what he said and I just started doing it exactly. I didn't have anything to lose."

After losing 55 pounds since November, Younger said he has never felt better. He has lost four pant sizes, two shirt sizes and any doubts that he could have done this much sooner in his life if he had only followed some basic principles of nutrition, diet portion control and overall good health.

"My original goal was to lose 25 pounds," said Younger. "I reached it so fast. The first week I lost seven pounds. The second week I lost five pounds and the third week I lost three pounds. I'm off my medicines. I don't need them anymore. I'm pre-diabetic; well I was pre-diabetic. I haven't felt this good since 1984."

Younger's sister Mary Leith said the change in her brother has been stark and inspiring.

"Before the weight change I could see it in him, he was very unhappy," said Leith. "There were no smiles. He struggled to get around and there were a lot of health issues. And then one day something just clicked with that guy."

Leith said it is nice to see her brother smiling again.

"Every week he would come in with a smile and it was another three pounds or another two pounds lost and it just went on and on," said Leith. "I could see the change in him – the happiness. He was getting around. He was up and down the stairs. He was walking five miles. He was walking from Grand Ronde to Willamina. I'm just so proud of him. I really think it probably saved his life."

Younger said that as he lost more weight he started doing more exercise. He also stuck to the core principles of a balanced, nutritional diet. He vowed to never return to his old habits and be like people who follow a diet, reach their goal and then stop and gain it all back.

"This guy talked about modifying your diet, your food intake," said Younger of his late-night TV savior. "He said eat what you like to eat and stick to the correct portions."

Younger said many things have happened to get him to this point



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Elder Lew Younger has lost 55 pounds since November by eating better and exercising. Part of his exercise includes walking a loop around Tribal housing and the Tribal campus, which includes the hill near the cultural area, twice a day.

and not all of them are late-night epiphanies.

"At the Elders Activity Center they have actually worked with me to make sure I get the salads and the protein lunches that I want and the fruits that I need," said Younger. "The help is there."

Elders Activity Center staff members said they appreciate Younger giving them credit for being helpful, but that it was Younger who took the first step to change things.

"Lew had been talking to (Elder Activity Assistant) Dan Ham about some of his health issues and we had just started a full-blown salad bar every day," said Cook Kevin Campbell. "He just took it on himself and took advantage of the salad bar set up that we have. He will sign in and let us know he is here, make a salad to go and then he is off to his spin class."

Campbell said that staff isn't doing anything for Younger that they wouldn't do for anyone else.

"He just sees what we have each day and he pretty much sticks to the salad bar," said Campbell. "He tries to balance it out with his proteins. He has done it himself really. We have just been here helping support him."

Campbell said what Younger is doing could easily be repeated by other Elders.

"I wish more of the Elders would take it upon themselves to do that," said Campbell. "Look at John Lillard (see sidebar). He (John) took it upon himself when he was overweight and he was on oxygen and now look at him. He's healthy. He's walking every day. It's a choice he made for himself. Lew and John are perfect examples of it being their choice and how it has changed their whole lifestyle."

Younger said he wants the Tribe to consider hiring a full-time nutritionist. He envisions someone dedicated to working with members on a full-time basis to monitor the processes and make things work. Younger said he sees this person

working not only with the membership, but with Tribal and casino employees as well.

"They (casino employees) would love to have something," said Younger. "They have noticed what has happened with me. The only thing I'm doing different than before is I'm watching portion control, drinking more water and getting more exercise. It's just lifestyle changes. I'm an advocate for lifestyle changes more than anything else."

"I did notice. He dropped an incredible amount of weight pretty quickly," said Patrick Dempsey, Human Resources director at Spirit Mountain Casino.

Dempsey said he and Younger discussed what he was doing and that they talked about Younger's nutritional approach and how much he is working out now.

"Lew is very invested in getting other people to follow that path and that's a good thing," said Dempsey. "He is a really good example."

Dempsey said Younger is correct that casino employees are looking for fitness alternatives.

"As far as the casino goes, from a business standpoint, but more importantly a human standpoint, we absolutely do quite a bit toward health and wellness and we would like to do even more," said Dempsey.

"We offer things like biometric screenings to employees. It's just a simple blood draw, but it gives you all your numbers and we can do that on site. It saves the employee money and it saves us a lot of money, and we get a much higher participation rate. These screenings tell people if they have an issue, what it is and what they can do about it."

Dempsey said the casino offers fitness classes at "extremely" reduced prices and that they do everything they can to encourage participation.

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